

The Sunday School Service.

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A Song of Praise.—Psalms 103: 1-22.

GOLDEN TEXT: "Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not all his benefits.—Ps. 103: 2.

[Open the Bible and read the lesson.]

INTRODUCTION.

This psalm has been ascribed to David by some Bible critics, while others think that it must have originated further on in the history of the Jewish nation; but as was stated before, that is a matter of little importance. It has been selected, and properly, as a salient point in human experience as recorded in the Bible. If we regard the psalms as a mountain range of praise, we must expect to see some peaks rising above their neighbors, so this psalm is far above many of the others in expressions of heart experience.

If it was written by David it must have been in the latter part of his life, after he had passed through the many scourings inflicted upon him on account of his transgressions and after he had, on different occasions experienced the rapture felt by the pardoned sinner.

LESSON.

Verse 1. "Bless the Lord." Man cannot "bless" anything, much less, the Lord of heaven and earth; but we can praise him and magnify his name in the eyes of others. "O my soul." Not my mouth only, but my soul. "All that is within me." All the powers of the mind, the affections of the heart and the promptings of the spirit.

Verse 2. "Forget not." Men are very liable to forget what they owe to God; they give themselves credit for acquiring what God has given them. "All his benefits." What man receives does not weigh upon his mind so much as what he gives to others, so he is inclined to forget what God has done for him while he magnifies his own good deeds.

Verse 3. Here follows an enumeration of some of the "benefits" mentioned above.

"Who forgiveth." God only can forgive, but he forgiveth all. "Thine iniquities." "No man liveth and sinneth not," all are in need of forgiveness. "Healeth all thy diseases. There were no physicians among the Jews except the priests, and all healing came from God.

Verse 4. "From destruction." Death, or the grave. The state of death in which the body passes into corruption.

Verse 5. "Who satisfieth thy mouth." Thy desire, appetite. "Like the eagle's." It is a question what is meant by the eagle's youth being renewed. It may mean simply that God's care had renewed David's soul and made it like an eagle's, though it may refer to the fact that an eagle's youth seems to be renewed after moulting.

Verse 6. "The Lord." The psalmist now turns from his own soul to his people. "Judgment * * * righteousness." The latter is the principle, the former the decision, prompted by that principle.

Verse 7. "He made known his ways unto Moses." By revealing His will to him.—"Acts." His acts were not hid, and did not need to be revealed.

Verse 8. "Plenteous in mercy." Full of mercy.

Verse 9. "He will not always chide." He may rebuke but he will not hold anger; He is as merciful to the wicked as to the good.

Verse 10. "He hath not dealt with us after our sins." Every one may say this and we have reason to be thankful that it is so; whatever may have been our lot we should be thankful that it is no worse.

Verse 11. "For as the heaven is high above the earth." The highest compared with the lowest. Nothing would show a stronger contrast.

Verse 12. "As far as the east is from the west." From one extreme to the other. It is equivalent to saying that our sins are entirely removed from us, and we are forgiven.

Verse 13. "Like as a father pitieth his children." "There is no love like a father's love."

Verse 14. "For he knoweth." Our maker knows our frailty and knows that if he should deal with us strictly the race would become extinct. Men, when they talk of God's cruelty, should be reminded that it is only through God's favor that they are permitted to live, and that whatever they possess beyond that they should be thankful for, be it ever so little.

Verses 15-16. "His days were as grass." Though he may live many days, he is liable to be cut off at any time. "Wind." The psalmist probably alludes to the hot southeast winds from the Arabian desert which withered all vegetation over which it passed.

Verses 17-18. "But." Notice the contrast, man may be as dust or the grass or a flower of the field, but the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. That is,

it lasts forever. "To such as keep his covenant." Man has something to do also, he must do his part if he would be sure of God's mercy for himself and his children.

Verse 19. Here begins a new division in the psalm.

Verse 20. "Bless the Lord, ye his angels." The psalmist first addresses himself to these higher powers. "That excel in strength." This probably refers to the Archangels that stand next to the throne and like faithful servants try to rival each other in their attentions to the Most High.

Verse 21. "Hosts." Refer to angels of a lower grade, those outside of—what might be called—the body guard.

Verse 22. "All his works." Even inanimate objects were called upon to praise the Lord. "O my soul." The lesson closes as it began by making a demand on his own soul.

Wesley on Intemperance.

In a sermon published in 1760, John Wesley says: "Drams of spiritous liquor are liquid fire, and all who manufacture or sell them, except as medicines, are poisoners generally. They murder his majesty's subjects by wholesale—they drive them to hell like sheep. The curse of God is in their gardens, their walks, their groves. Blood—blood is there. The foundation, the floor, the walls, the roofs of their dwellings are stained with blood!"

And a letter published December 1st, 1772, in Lloyd's *Evening Post*, signed by him, contains the following: "Have we not reason to believe that half of the wheat produced in the kingdom is every year consumed, not by so harmless a way of throwing it into the sea, but by converting it into a deadly poison—poison that destroys not only strength and life, but also the morals of our countrymen? Well, but this brings in a large revenue to the king! Is this an equivalent for the lives of his subjects? Would his majesty sell a hundred thousand of his subjects yearly to Algiers for four hundred thousand pounds? "But otherwise the swine of the navy cannot be fed." Not unless they are fatted with human flesh; not unless they are fatted with human blood! Oh, tell it not in Constantinople that the English raise the royal revenue by selling the blood and flesh of their own countrymen!"

Gothold's Prayer.

O God! I have no desire to be anything but what thou hast made me. I grudge not the great and mighty what thou givest them. Nay, I know not that I would exchange my poverty for their wealth, my solitude for their lofty rank. One thing however I do implore. Let me reign over the sin that dwells within me. Teach me to govern myself and grant that I may one day be permitted humbly to enter that celestial city welcomed by the holy angels and wearing the crown of life.

ABUSE OF THE SCRIPTURES.

The Apostle Peter says: "The ignorant and unsteadfast wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction"; and what these do to their own ruin, they certainly do also to the ruin of others and the great injury of truth and the religion of God. Among the most prominent facts in the history of the Church, Jewish and Christian, is the outrageous abuse of the Word of God, in every age, by the men who claimed to be its interpreters. Nowhere in religious matters has the ugly perversity of man been more manifest than just here; and from no source, too, has greater wrong been done to the cause of truth and righteousness. The Bible is, *par excellence*, the friend and advocate of light—all light; of truth, of righteousness, of love, of freedom, of mercy, of philanthropy, of progress; of everything, in fine, that truly exalts man and furthers all the great interests of our race, in temporal and in eternal things. It is never, in spirit or word, the friend of darkness, of falsehood or deception, of absurdities and stupidities, of iniquity, of hate, of cruelty, of oppression, of bondage, of tyranny, temporal or spiritual, of any form or human wrongs; of hostility to progress; of anything, in fact, that humiliates and degrades man; that wrongs him, and wars against his best present and eternal interests.

No man would venture in a frank and formal manner, to contradict what we have said. Yet nothing is more true than that in all times—to-day as in darker ages—the Holy Scriptures, this treasure of the purest and most perfect light and truth and love, have been, by men of ignorance and perverse minds, and by most perverse methods, made to support the most outrageous absurdities and follies, the most grievous wrongs; have been used as hindrances to the best efforts of progress, in secular and religious things; and have been so used and abused as to bring the most grievous reproaches on the cause of God in the face of a gainsaying world.

There are really, no greater enemies of the Bible than these men who so pervert it in its meaning, its use, and intention. Rank, bold, absolute infidelity has not harmed Christianity as much as this scandalous abuse of God's Word.

The true origin of this prostitution of the divine revelation is not difficult to discover. First of all, as the apostle's words at once declare, it is *ignorance*—ignorance of the true method of interpreting any book, and then, especially, the Book of God. No, it is not true that every man, however ill-taught and ignorant he may be, can at once fall on the Bible and correctly and safely understand and expound it. Then it is ignorance of the means—the necessary antecedent knowledge that alone can lead us to the true meaning of particular passages, *i. e.* of the general teaching and spirit of the Holy Scripture; of the scope and context; and finally of the things referred to and the words occurring in the special passages under examination. Then come in, also, and very generally, the prejudices, the conceit and the obstinacy that almost always accompany active, energetic ignorance. Nowhere are the best mental training of the mind, a wide knowledge, wisdom, deliberation, rich experience and training, clear judgment and freedom from prepossession, more necessary than in the office of biblical interpretation; and nowhere does the absence of these qualities and possessions do more positive injury.

But another and very general source of this rude violence to the Divine Word is the stubborn determination to force it to support certain favorite opinions, and not seldom, also, to seek in it for countenance of favorite evil habits and sins. Men guilty of this outrage on the Word of God do not go to it with a sincere, honest purpose to discover truth that they may joyfully accept it; with them the Bible is referred to only to support and encourage them in "their own conceits" and "their evil ways." Careful observation reveals an amazingly wide prevalence of the sinful passion thus to pervert the teachings of God for the most selfish purposes. Of course, these perverters of the Holy Scriptures, through ignorance, and from a vicious purpose, would be very far from acknowledging any improper motive on their part; on the contrary, they generally claim to possess a reverence for the Bible and for truth, by preeminence. But we are not to be deceived by such pious and vigorously asserted pretenses; these pretenses, however solemnly and religiously made and maintained, pass with the intelligent just for what they are worth, and for no more. Most always the secret of the real cause is perfectly transparent to all not actually blind; and all the most pretentious and pious protestation can not conceal the actual truth.

We wish now more particularly to specify some of these perverse abuses of the Bible, by way of warning against them.

1. Never attempt to make the Scripture advocate what is manifestly ridiculous and absurd; what is without question, an outrage on common sense. If any man thinks it superfluous to offer such advice he knows very little of the countless, amazing absurdities that have been and are advocated by Scripture, and that, too, not very rarely by persons that are not fools by any means, but who often claim high intelligence and a good degree of education and culture. A quarto of the size of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, small print, could not contain all the stupidities and silly conceits that have been saddled on the Scriptures by men of ignorant and perverse minds, and equally perverse motives. One argues that the Bible does not sanction the use of buttons, but allows hooks and eyes; there is a religious body spread over Europe and America, two centuries old, who hold to this faith. The Quakers find support in the Scripture for their peculiarities in dress and speech. To another sapient Bible interpreter its voice forbids in the end of a church edifice a window that has the shape of a wheel—a "Catharine wheel;" were the window square, or of any other form, it would meet the law of the Holy Spirit's instructions! Still another reads in, or between the lines in the New Testament, a rule forbidding baptizing in water if it be enclosed in an artificial basin and under a roof; and authorized only water that is under the open sky and in a natural bed. We have found those who understood the Bible to forbid cushions on the seats of churches; but allowing them in the private houses. One man learned from the first two chapters of Genesis that God made man twice, or two different Adams. Another gravely argues that preachers must not be paid by agreement or a stated amount. Such and similar follies, often much graver, at other times immensely sillier than these we have noticed, have been interpreted out of men's disordered heads and hearts into the Bible.

2. Set not the Bible forth as the friends of ignorance, and as the enemy of knowledge.

this has been done a thousand times, and is now done, by men professing to be the teachers of the Bible—its especial expounders and guardians. It is an old folly, constantly repeated. Men in high places, often, in the church, have warned against and derided the progress of knowledge. In our own day, preachers and editors have denounced, on religious grounds, the teaching of mental philosophy and natural sciences in our institutions of learning. Others have cried out against the special education of ministers of the gospel. While these wise men, "watchmen on the walls of Zion," consented that men in every other calling need and deserve both a general and a special education, this—the latter—for some unaccountable reason, must not be granted to men preparing for the preacher's calling; they may study mathematics, Horace, Xenophon, chemistry, but there must be no studies appertaining especially to the ministerial calling. Anything but the commonest chances of learning is forbidden by some Christians as very dangerous, just as the Catholic Church forbids the study of the Bible to the laity.

3. Do not teach the world that the Bible and Christianity are opposed to the spirit and practice of free inquiry. The folly of past centuries, that condemned free investigation and not seldom punished it in its advocates, lingers among us yet, in spite of the sad experience of hundreds of years and the better light of our day. It is impossible to calculate the vast amount of injury the cause of the Bible has suffered from these its false friends. It brings immense discredit on the Christian faith for its advocates to make it appear that it dreads free inquiry. This is itself a gloomy infidelity that trembles at new discoveries, lest the Bible should fall before better light. It is a false notion of the Bible that thus distrusts the progress of knowledge. The truth is, as Dr. Pye Smith says, "it follows as universal truth that the Bible, faithfully interpreted, erects no barrier against the most free and extensive investigation, the most comprehensive and searching induction. Let but the investigation be sufficient and the induction honest; let observation take its farthest flight; let experiment penetrate into all the recesses of nature; let the veil of ages be lifted up from all that has hitherto been unknown—if such a course were possible; religion need not fear; Christianity is secure."

4. Set not the Bible in hostile array against science. The unnecessary prejudices and opposition created among the friends of science by the unwise, ignorant, "faithless" denunciation of scientific investigations and discoveries, have done immense harm to religion. There can be no conflict between true science and the Bible, as both are equally true, and as the truth of both is from God, and hence divine. There is true science, and "science falsely so called." When we speak of science we mean, of course the former, and can mean no other. It is immensely discreditable to religion to see its advocates arrayed against the noble prosecution of scientific truth. As Sir David Brewster, a true Christian believer, says, "Truths physical have an origin as divine as truths religious * * * Science ever has been, and ever will be, the hand maid of religion."

5. Never interpret the Bible in the interest of that which is a curse to humanity—a crime against it. Do not array, for example, the voice of the Holy Spirit on the side of the liquor crime in any way, and against true and grand efforts made by good men to destroy that awful iniquity from the earth. But Christian men have often committed this sinful folly, and have covered the holy name of the religion of Christ with shame and reproach.

6. Never dare to find in the Bible authority for the oppression of men; for the iniquities practiced on individuals and nations by tyrants, by men of power, of violent cruel ambition; by the Napoleons and Bismarks of our age, whose greed of dominion and power has drowned whole nations in blood and vast desolation. Woe to the religious guides and woe to the church that makes themselves the religious advocates and associates of these great scourges of mankind! the abhorrence of men and the avenging judgment of God must be their doom.

7. Make not the holy word of God to teach and justify bigotry, party strifes, sectarian hate, or any form of religious intolerance, either between men or different creeds or men of the same faith. Call not these hateful vices "contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints," and so in a fearful manner, offend against God and his truth.

All these abuses of the Holy Scriptures and of the religion of Jesus have darkened the history of the Church, and are yet darkening it; and terrible has been the effect of all this on the Church itself, and on the world against the Church, the Bible, and the work of God on the earth.—C. L. L. in *Christian Standard*.